

## Winter Recreation Use in the Greater Yellowstone Area

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Winter in the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA) is a special time of year when images of wildlife in winter, frozen waterfalls, snow-covered mountains, and the colorful thermal features attract visitors from around the world. With the increased use and popularity, how can managers ensure that national park and national forest resources are protected and that quality visitor experiences are provided?

Winter use of the parks and the surrounding national forests has increased significantly in the past 15 years. Yellowstone National Park's *Winter Use Plan* of 1990 established a visitation threshold of 140,000 people per year, a target projected to be met by year 2000. The threshold was exceeded in 1992. Snowmobile counts on the Hebgen Lake Ranger District, Gallatin National Forest, increased from 47,552 in 1984/85 to 101,691 in 1997/98, an increase of 113 percent.

In 1994, the Greater Yellowstone Coordinating Committee chartered an interagency study team to complete an assessment of winter use in the GYA. The 1999 publication, *Winter Visitor Use Management: A Multi-agency Assessment*, provided information on current winter use including winter trails, areas of concentrated use, and areas of recreation and resource conflict.

As a result of a 1997 lawsuit regarding winter use, the National Park Service agreed to update their winter use plan. An environmental impact statement was prepared with extensive public involvement. The resulting winter use plan was approved for Yellowstone and Grand Teton National

Parks, and for the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Memorial Parkway in December 2000. The plan calls for gradually phasing out personal snowmobile use over the next three seasons. In 2003–2004 and thereafter, most oversnow motorized visitor travel in the three park units would be by NPS-managed snowcoach only. In Grand Teton, snowmobile use would continue to be allowed on the Conti-



*Snowmobilers.*

ental Divide Snowmobile Trail and on access routes leading to private lands and adjacent national forest lands.

Management direction for winter use on surrounding national forests is outlined in existing land use management plans and in forest travel plans. Five of the six national forests within the GYCC will begin revision of their forest plans over the next few years. Reliable information on winter use will be important for updating management and travel plans, responding to anticipated legal challenges, and for management of threatened and endangered species including grizzly bears, lynx, and the petitioned wolverine. In addition, 36 CFR 295.5 requires monitoring of the effects of off road vehicle use on National Forest System lands and resources.

### GYCC Activities

The GYCC recently developed a winter use monitoring plan designed to address the following issues on national forest lands:

- Will restrictions in snowmobile use in national parks result in changes in snowmobile use on national forests?
- How does winter use within the GYA affect forest carnivores, including denning and emerging grizzly bears, lynx, and wolverine?
- Where and to what extent is winter use occurring throughout the GYA? Is improved technology resulting in more access to traditionally remote areas?
- Where are areas of major recreation use conflict between visitors?
- Is the capacity and function of facilities adequate to safely accommodate existing and future use?

The monitoring plan calls for collection of recreation use trend data at key trailheads, mapping the geographic extent of winter recreation use, and monitoring recreation conflicts.

Other GYCC activities include the 1999 publication *Effects of Winter Recreation on Wildlife of the Greater Yellowstone Area: A Literature Review and Assessment*. "Ride the Right Trail," an effort to improve signing and visitor awareness of winter travel restrictions including entry into wilderness, was financed with GYCC project funds.

# Greater Yellowstone Area: Winter Use

